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JOHN EGLINTON

BY ERNEST A. BOYD

THE following letter from the distinguished English scholar, the late Professor Dowden, to the writer of this essay, was written just before his death, in fact, the last letter he wrote.—THE EDITOR.

“DUBLIN, *March 28, 1913.*

“DEAR MR. BOYD,—I have read your article on ‘John Eglinton’ with much interest. I have always regarded John Eglinton as a writer of exceptional originality, and as one whose thoughts are of great value not to Ireland only, but to readers everywhere who care for things of the mind. To make him more widely known is to do good service to what is spiritual in modern life, and just now, when there is a movement (of which the influence of Eucken and Bergson is an indication) toward what one may call a more idealistic way of looking at things, his time may have arrived. When R. le Gallienne gave him enthusiastic praise, the time was less favorable. Your article is saturated with John Eglinton’s thought, and sets it forth with great fidelity. Perhaps in America your “Irish Emerson” would be welcomed, partly because of the interest there in the Irish literary movement, and partly because there is in the American intellect a sympathy with such older writers as Emerson and Thoreau. I don’t know that ‘J. E.’ is not as much a ‘spiritual Thoreau’ as an ‘Irish Emerson.’

“Very truly yours,

“E. DOWDEN.”

Mr. John Eglinton is probably the least known of the group of writers associated with the Irish literary revival. Younger men, in reality his successors, have achieved a certain degree of fame or popularity, while he remains a figure apart, known only to the few who appreciate the charm of his beautiful prose. He is “a sort of lonely thorn-tree,” as George Moore described him in *Ave*; but “the thorn breaks into flower” and then we get, sometimes the luxuriance of *Two Essays on the Remnant*, sometimes the less riotous bloom of *Pebbles from a Brook*. These two volumes together with *Bards and Saints*, constitute Mr. Eglinton’s

slender contribution to permanent literature. For the rest, his work is scattered throughout the pages of various reviews and esoteric magazines, from whence it has not yet been rescued, although vain attempts have been made to persuade the author to do so. In the last two volumes, as also in *Literary Ideals in Ireland*, some of these essays have been saved from the dusty oblivion of the files of periodical literature, those mines of hidden wealth, the joy of the literary explorer and the despair of librarians. It is not surprising, therefore, that he has escaped the attention of the majority of critics, who have identified Anglo-Irish literature with the work of its poets and dramatists. Although he has written some verse, Mr. Eglinton has never come forward as a dramatist, and his claim to consideration must be based solely upon his distinction as an essayist.

It is not only in his failure to attain popularity that Mr. Eglinton is an isolated figure in contemporary literature. A certain ironical detachment and skepticism indicate a mentality not usually associated with the writers of the Irish literary movement. The illusory, shadowy world to which Mr. Yeats has accustomed his readers, and the flamboyant rhetorical energy of Synge's peasantry find no counterpart in the writings of John Eglinton. Those who have identified the two phases of the Irish mind with the "Celtic Twilight" of the Yeats school, and the verbal magnificence of Synge's drama, will find in him a very different aspect of the Irish mind. It is popularly supposed that Mr. Eglinton is a mystic, but the term has only been applied to him in public as one of abuse, by unfriendly critics, of whom he has many. His mysticism does not express itself in terms of pantheistic rapture as in the works of "AE," whose name is most intimately associated with the cult of the inner life in Ireland. Like the poet, he has felt the touch of the "earth-breath" upon him, but the voice of Nature called to him rather as to Wordsworth, inviting him to flee from "the dull banausic murmur" of city life. In the green trees and the open country, Mr. Eglinton sees as it were a protest against the ugliness of civilization which has forced us to "coagulate into cities." He rejoices to see our cities submit to "the green invasion of the passive trees" representing the return of all that we have suppressed from our lives. He does not seek solitude like "AE," that he may be in communion with the Divine Spirit

of the Universe, but rather as a step in the direction of the mystical wilderness whither he has called upon the idealists to follow him. That, indeed, was the message by which he first revealed himself some twenty years ago in *Two Essays on the Remnant*.

It is hardly possible to analyze this wonderful little book with its enigmatic title suggestive of Hebrew prophecy. It is an appeal to what Isaiah called "the remnant that are left," the band of artists and thinkers who have not been assimilated by modern civilization. They must, as the Chosen People, betake themselves once again to the wilderness and withdraw from a life in which they can take no part, and which is in fact hostile to them. In the presence within the state of the unemployed idealist Mr. Eglinton sees the cause of all social upheavals and discontents. "Once a man is glamoured with the thought of the wilderness he becomes indifferent." "He is no longer a good citizen, and he infects with his indifference those who should be so." If the Chosen People had only retired from a system of things in which they have no concern "there would have been no oppression in store for them and no uneasy dreams for the Pharaoh of civilization. The French Revolution was only the first of the great plagues." Civilization seems to have no work for the "lapsed masses" of idealism. "We declare," cries Mr. Eglinton, "that civilization is advancing, in so far as it is doing so, with a velocity acquired before it had begun to discard the services of such persons as ourselves," and he warns us of the danger to the community of these supernumerary citizens. Some of them can subsist for a time "on the fag ends of wages and patrimonies" and have much time for "sharpening their wits in reflection and reading," and they are not all so harmless as Mr. Eglinton, who, if "armed not with bombs but with generalizations," explains that it is only because he can handle these "with less risk to himself because he has more confidence in them."

Few of the generalizations are sounder than that upon which he bases his criticism of modern social conditions. "The test of the state of civilization is therefore quite simple—whether in assisting it the individual is astride of his proper instincts." But Mr. Eglinton holds that, instead of being superior to each of its units the state is "centuries behindhand." Nowadays development is in-

dividual, hence the formation of a remnant which must go apart and dwell in the wilderness and "live the great life beneath the sun and moon." Removed from progress, to which they no longer contribute, leaving their ideas to fructify in the soil they have fertilized, the idealists will derive a new inspiration and prepare themselves for future sowings. If they remain they are obliged to profane their minds and to submit to slavery, which Mr. Eglinton admirably defines as the condition in which "the mind consents to labor for the body." As the Chosen People of old made bricks, so the bondage of their successors is bookmaking, a task for which they are peculiarly fitted. "The pen indeed seems to grow to the hand of an idealist, to carry his slender finger like an Arab horseman over the silent plains of foolscap." In their capacity as "thought-artisans" employment has been found for the remnant, though they remain, as they started, "a class subservient to alien interests." Their function is reduced to "ministering intellectual interests in all kinds of ingenious ways to an unbelieving public," they have been betrayed by their very "dexterity" in the manipulation of ideas.

In Goethe, Mr. Eglinton sees the Joseph who has, by reason of his prosperity, become the cause of the captivity of his brethren. It was Goethe who discovered "the vast capacities of art as an absorbent medium," when the atmosphere of Europe was "unduly charged with ideas and threatened to enter the life of each man with disastrous consequences to society." Nevertheless, Mr. Eglinton recognizes Goethe as one of the glories of idealism, whatever disservice his prosperity may have rendered those who followed him. He describes a pilgrimage to the little room at Weimar whither came "the restless and swarming ideas which had lately seemed to cloud all the plains of Europe under their wings, and minister ecliptic darkness to the performance of evil deeds." With Schiller as *Zauberlehrling*, Weimar became the "chief emporium of ideas in Europe," in which Goethe carried on a brisk business, discharging his surplus "in the form of epigrams" on those less fortunate. This procedure is likened by the essayist to that of young men who "fling hot pennies to the rabble." On the death of Goethe it seemed as if the idealists were to come into their own and that "the consummation of the promised land would not exclude the flesh-

pots of Egypt." Soon, however, civilization turned its attention to its own concerns, leaving the idealists "where the flood tide had raised them." The choice before the idealist is therefore to perpetuate the onward impulse in his life, or to resign himself to "ministering with an ever-dwindling imaginative reason to the requirements of civilization." Such is the fate in store for the remnant; for they have no Moses to lead them forth into the wilderness. They have not harkened to the voices—Rousseau, Whitman, Tolstoy—calling upon them to abandon "the doomed hulk of modern civilization." Mr. Eglinton concludes:

"Civilization has been too much for them—circumstances over which they had no control. The gods, at least, have not loved them. And at length, some dry-eyed poet, glancing sidelong and half in fear at the watching heavens, once so blue and fortunate to his early vision, pens a last blasphemy of them, and leaving his tablets behind him and covering his eyes, hurries down into the way of death."

There is a beautiful description of Wordsworth, "the tall North-country youth" walking up and down in London, trying "to catch on as a citizen." Wordsworth, whom he regards as the "first and greatest of the unemployed," is Mr. Eglinton's constant companion. His name which was "a far-fluttering unattainable carol" to the author in the beginning has since seldom been absent from his thoughts. He pictures the poet as he walks in Cheapside and hears the song of a thrush. It is the time of the "ruddy sunsets of the French Revolution" when men were suspicious of foreigners, yet they do not see in Wordsworth what Mr. Eglinton had perceived, when he cried:

"Seize him, ye Londoners! It is a treachery! He is no Gallic emissary, but worse! He is in league with the green hosts of trees, whose barbaric siege ye have put back so long from year to year, and of the countless horde of grass that springs in the breaches of ruins and in the interstices of depopulate pavements!"

Like Socrates, Wordsworth may be accused of corrupting the youths by "indisposing them for civic action." The temptation to quote is great, but this final picture of the Chosen People at work must suffice:

"Civilized man is once more a savage, but he is not as if civilization had never been. He is no longer what he was when the failure within him of his ruder instincts left him social and stationary. He has now left his barbaric ennui behind him, and with a full heart turns once more to nature, his home and his mother. . . . He is as one who

goes forth into the morning woods, in whose brain yet flaunt the pomps and processions of his dreams."

Mr. Eglinton has been described by some as "an Irish Emerson," and in *Pebbles from a Brook* he has substantiated this claim on his behalf. Such subjects as "Knowledge," "Apostolic Succession," or "The Three Qualities in Poetry" immediately suggest the great American essayist. Like Emerson, whom he has evidently thoroughly absorbed, Mr. Eglinton is a transcendentalist. "It is religion," he writes, "which has made the daring attempt to give a meaning to life," but we have broken with past beliefs, without having found a substitute. We have pinned our faith to science, but scientists admit "that something is wanting in the Universe to answer to the moral element in experience." So long as we direct our lives from without inward, rather than from within outward, Mr. Eglinton sees little hope of our supplying this deficiency. Mankind has become enamoured of the mere acquisition of knowledge, "big brains have been in requisition rather than great natures," but in the plethora of facts the meaning of life has become obscured. "The age of omniscience is the age of agnosticism." We must turn to ourselves, to our own experiences, which embody facts outside the range of scientific speculation. "We ourselves are the center from which radiate all the paths of speculation," let us therefore be less concerned with the discoveries of science. "It is the function of philosophy to launch a generalization into human consciousness," there the cold truths of the laboratory may become forces, provided they enlist human sympathy. What we need is that transcendental certainty which resides in the inmost being of man, and which the poet and thinker alone can give us. "The serried ranks of science and common sense" have failed in this task, for they have sought without what is only forthcoming from within. Science, however is suspicious of visionaries "as being thaumaturgist in tendency" and he must be "a clever thaumaturgus who will do anything with the eyes of the evolutionary philosophers upon him." Evolution does not take account of the exceptional, but of the normal. "It knows only of householders and shareholders who ride the central flood of evolutionary tendency, blown along by the soft gales of natural selection." Sometimes, however, nature

sends men into the world to test the value of society, not in the light of acquired knowledge, but by the touchstone of feeling and intuition. The voices of our poets and idealists recall us to a sense of our own worth, "we realize that man himself is the test of all things and are conscious of the reality of the inward life." But we are inclined to view art and religion as objective values without any relation to what is essential in us. Hence the effort of literature to become divorced from life and to aspire to live for art's sake, a proceeding which Mr. Eglinton likens to "the declaration of a beauty past her prime that she will have nothing more to do with men."

In "Heroic Literature" Mr. Eglinton confesses the difficulties which await the poet who once more attempts to find his theme in man. He regards as signs of the absence of poetic inspiration in modern life, the revival of the heroic literature of Ireland, and the experiments of Morris with the Norse and Teutonic legends. With regret he recalls the heroic period when we carried latent within ourselves all the arts, sciences, and inventions, all the joys and virtues which have since proceeded from us, taking shape outside ourselves. Then man, "a great somber fellow, shouting his pedigree at you, when he spoke to you, knew all that he owned and clearly marked the frontiers outside which he owed homage to the visible powers." His deeds were great and he was a fitting subject for heroic song. But what is the figure which now offers itself to the eyes of the modern poet? Not Finn, nor Ajax, nor Cuchulain, but Livingstone, Gordon, or Burton, who suggest "a pathological rather than a poetic treatment on the side of their intercourse with the gods." Mr. Eglinton sorrowfully traces this process of decay in man until

"At last he rolls bankrupt on the ground, a shell, his power gone from him, civilization like a robe whirled down the stream out of his reach in eddies of London and Paris, the truth no longer the ichor of his being, but a cloudy evaporated mass of problems above his head....that is he, *homo sapiens*, poor, naked, neurotic, undeceived ribbless wretch, make what you can of him, ye bards!"

It is to Wordsworth that Mr. Eglinton would have the poet turn his steps. In the *Lyrical Ballads* he sees what we may get from the man who sings his own joys and experiences, casting the poetic light upon the "turbid and dull

world of civic action." If it has happened to poetry, as to philosophy and religion, that they must be sought in the individual, why should he despair? "It is from the poet's soul that the poetic light is cast upon the world and not from the world upon the poet's soul"; the changed conditions are an advantage, for they throw the poet back upon himself, to the great world of his own imagination. The warrior is no longer the hero of an age which demands the realization of the ideal. "The poem that is to justify the modern world must, in the first place, be a man." It must be a song of victory, of the virtue of man, which will restore to him a sense of his own identity and his own greatness.

Politics, so long the sole manifestation of vitality in Ireland, is the touchstone with which every Irishman is tested. Mr. Eglinton has had to answer the inevitable challenge and to declare his political views, which are summed up in the Essay on "Regenerate Patriotism." In a country which refuses to recognize all finer shades of opinion and where political labels are distributed on the most elementary principle, Mr. Eglinton is an anomaly. His attitude is highly disconcerting, inasmuch as it interferes with the popular system of classification. There seems to be a tacit understanding that all criticism of national aspirations must come from the side of the enemy, for whom a reply is usually ready. But when the critic cannot be stigmatized as hostile to national ideals, the problem of silencing him becomes more difficult. The stereotyped reproaches are ineffective and consternation reigns until some one remembers a well-known device, and the offender is reviled as a wretch who dares to "calumny" his native land. Mr. Eglinton's failure to reach a becomingly lyrical note in his expression of nationality and patriotism has secured for him the unqualified hostility of vociferous patriots. As he says, "popular patriotism submits with no better grace than popular religion to the criticism of philosophy." Undismayed, however, he has submitted the idea of patriotism to an analysis by no means usual in Ireland, where sentiment reaches a religious fervor and holds undisputed sway. In his attitude towards "unregenerate patriotism" Mr. Eglinton reveals himself as still holding the view of the individual in society which he put forward in *Two Essays on the Remnant*. As civilization seemed to

him to have no use for the "lapsed masses of idealism," so, too, he argues, patriotism suffers as culture and civilization develop. Culture gives men resources within themselves, civilization diminishes "the external factors of patriotism," as wars become fewer and states grow so unwieldy that the individual can no longer be identified with them. The nation is no longer an organic whole in which each has his work and "all inequalities are compensated in the unifying sense of nationality." A man can no longer say "this is my own, my native land," for "it has come to belong to a small number of the sons and daughters of privilege." As for historical memories, a country's past is not necessarily more creditable than the past of any individual, while "all the battles that were ever fought and resulted in victory to the rights of man, were fought on the same side." Mr. Eglinton concludes:

"Patriotism, in fact, in the old sense, is only possible when the whole life interest of the individual is comprised within that of the patria. When individuality is hatched and has become independent of the community, the relation of the individual to it must suffer a change. Instead of a receiver he becomes a giver."

The regenerate patriotism which Mr. Eglinton would substitute, is based upon the relation of a man with his fellow-men and with nature, rather than upon his relation to the state. This is the theme of the poetry which the essayist admires, the poetry of Wordsworth, in whom "that love of country is once again blended, as traditional patriotism traditionally is, with religion." Here the veil which separates us from nature is torn aside, we see her beauty, holiness, and wisdom, she is no longer Maya or illusion, but "an extension of ourselves, our guide, support, and teacher." Our native land is but a part of nature, and as such we should love it. How remote is this ideal from the actual conditions of patriotism in Ireland, which Mr. Eglinton describes as "querulously claiming our errant affections!" The poet must obey the law of individual freedom if he is to attain unto himself, for to him, if he be true to his nature, is intrusted the soul of the nation. His country may protest, but it will ultimately recognize that such as he can alone confer true glory upon the patria. In conclusion, he apostrophizes his country in a passage for which the unregenerate patriots have never forgiven him:

"No, no! my patria! I will persist in seeing thee a virgin mother made of the nearest thing to God that we know, the magnetic and teeming soil, and will still behold thee beautiful and unprofaned, no palsied beldam with whiskey on thy breath and a crucifix in thy hand—two things I have never loved."

To Gaelic chauvinists Mr. Eglinton's literary criticism is no less suspect than his patriotism. His attitude towards and his judgments in Irish literature have usually been unfavorable to popular illusion. The essays which have been reprinted in *Literary Ideals in Ireland* represent Mr. Eglinton's part in the controversy which was carried on in the *Dublin Daily Express* when Standish O'Grady, "AE," W. B. Yeats, and others were preparing the way for the Irish Dramatic Movement. Mr. Eglinton argued that while Irish legends lent themselves to poetic or dramatic treatment no less than those of ancient Greece, it was doubtful if anything greater than belles-lettres could come from a determined preoccupation with them. National literature he defined as "the outcome and expression of a strong interest in life itself," whereas "belles-lettres seek a subject outside experience." If our poets look away from themselves and their age, if they see in the past merely an escape from the present, their art is not the expression of the life around them and cannot therefore be either representative or national. The poetry which has been most a fact of life in England is the Wordsworthian, so Mr. Eglinton warns Mr. Yeats of the danger of the latter's contempt of popular poetry. Art for the sake of art may achieve "the occult triumphs of the symbolist school," but in time "humanity will return its indifference in kind, and leave it to the dignity and consolation of unpopularity." Mr. Eglinton criticizes the attitude common to both poets and politicians, who imagine that, because Ireland is the scene of a heroic past, Irishmen thereby become endowed with special virtues. He urges us to prove our worth and to feel that "we have as good a right to exist on this soil and on our own merits as Finn or Cuchulain."

Nobody desires more ardently than John Eglinton to see Ireland possessed of a national literature, but his definition of the term places him in opposition to the means popularly employed to achieve that end. In *Bards and Saints* will be found the essence of his criticism of the Gaelic revival, particularly in the Essay on "The De-

Davisization of Irish Literature.” In Davis he sees the root of all the confusion which lies at the bottom of the Irish Language Movement:

“What the Irish Nationalist, as instructed by Davis, means by ‘National literature’ is not the interpretation of the soul of a people, still less the emancipation of the national mind by means of individual utterance, but . . . the expression of such sentiments as help to exalt an Irishman’s notion of the excellence and importance of the race to which he belongs.”

Such is the keynote of all that Mr. Eglinton has written of recent years upon the question of Irish literature. He has pointed out the fatal effect upon the intellectual life of Ireland of banishing from literature those fundamental ideas of religion and morality whose discussion has everywhere led to some broad agreement as a basis of national existence. In *Dana*, the review of which he was editor, Mr. Eglinton once welcomed the recrudescence of religious bigotry as “one of the most genuine signs of the new awakening in Irish life.” The fact that Irishmen sedulously avoid religious and other topics upon which they have “agreed to differ,” simply means that in certain respects Ireland is just emerging from the seventeenth century. We make a mistake in recommending tolerance prematurely, as was suggested once in *Dana*, instead of insisting upon an understanding at whatever cost, as was the case in all the countries where national literature is not wholly divorced from the main problems of life. Political independence, the revival of the Irish language, what can they be but the hollow forms of nationality, when all the vital factors in national life are banished from literature and conversation? Ireland has never made up her mind definitely upon the religious question. Her Catholicism is peculiarly Protestant in spirit, and, as Mr. Eglinton suggests, may possibly be the unnaturally developed offspring of what at one time bid fair to be the Celtic, as distinct from the Greek and Roman, Church. The Irish language itself is the utterance of youthful paganism, and is by no means the expression of the piety with which some would associate it. In view of the intellectual paralysis which this avoidance of essentials has engendered in Irish life, it is not surprising that Mr. Eglinton should be a consistent critic of all the forces which make for the continuation of this state of affairs. This morbid anxiety on the subject of patriotism, this con-

stant preoccupation with a heroic past, cannot give birth to a genuinely national literature, which will reflect the mind and soul of a people. "It is by a thought movement, rather than by a language movement, that Ireland will have to show that it holds the germs of true nationality."

Detachment is the dominant note of Mr. John Eglinton's philosophy. He moves serenely in the din of party cries, uttering a word of quiet criticism or exhortation, to the discomfiture of the factions, whose mechanical vociferations pass for manifestations of Irish political life. He writes but rarely, and each of his essays is a perfect gem of scintillating thought whose flashes illuminate some obscure corner of popular belief. At one time we find him fighting on behalf of the Anglo-Irishman and his literature, at others he is engaged in a damaging original criticism of the Irish language. As might be expected, the author of *Two Essays on the Remnant* does not accuse the Gael of being "impractical." All the more effective, therefore, is his contention that Irish "retains a rude flavor as of a language which has never properly been to school." It is not, however, only the popular idols of language and patriotism which Mr. Eglinton regards with the eye of critical skepticism. In the short-lived *Shanachie* he treated St. Patrick in a spirit which indicated complete freedom from the associations that have rendered this subject peculiarly sacrosanct. Speaking of our inability to portray saints and our tendency to make heroes of malefactors, he indulges in some characteristic *boutades* at Milton's expense. Thanks to the author of "Paradise Lost," having learned to know Satan, we rather like him, and we feel that when he fell, "all that was the least interesting in heaven fell with him." Finally Mr. Eglinton warns us that "we must cease to treat celestial matters until we can state Jehovah's case with more sympathetic insight." It will be seen that the intellectual tradition to which his countrymen Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw belong can also claim a representative in John Eglinton. It is not, however, that he is prone to paradox. George Moore probably summed him up when he said that he was a doubter, "he doubts even of his own beautiful prose."

Skepticism is at the root of Mr. Eglinton's criticism of art and life. The *Two Essays* are the exasperated outburst of a young idealist at the first contact of disillusion-

ment. Since then he has lost many of the enthusiasms which still inspire his contemporaries. *Pebbles from a Brook* contains the same fundamental ideas as that early plea on behalf of the "unemployed idealist," but there is more restraint, and that restraint is reflected in the style. The essays in *Dana* and the little volume *Bards and Saints* everywhere reveal the same attitude of inquiry towards the aim and value of progress as understood in modern civilization. Mr. Eglinton is ever in search of a "new spiritual initiative." He turns from "the continual tabulation of facts," which is science but not knowledge, to the poet who alone can give us trouble and wisdom. He sees that the men who have most profoundly affected human thought have been the Rousseaus, Wordsworths, Thoreaus, and Tolstoys, those who have preached a gospel resolutely opposed to that which governs modern "progress." In this direction, therefore, he conceives our hopes of development to lie. In a recent essay in the *Irish Review*, Mr. Eglinton returns to his first profession of faith in the "Chosen People," "the intellectuals," as he now calls them. "It is amongst these," he writes, "that a new idea might conceivably arise which might even lead ultimately to a new form of civilization." It is easy to understand his dissatisfaction with what is the only approach to a stirring of the national soul in Ireland. But political and linguistic independence cannot give Ireland that real personality which comes from the existence of an inner life. The work of "AE" and his disciples has made this fact a point of departure, and it was, no doubt, with that in mind that Mr. Eglinton penned the phrase quoted above. Here he sees an effort towards effecting a thought revival in which the outworn shibboleths of intellectual stagnation will be cast into the melting-pot, whence will emerge a new and living creed. This creed must not harden into dogma, it must be flexible, the ever-changing expression of the human soul. As Mr. Eglinton once expressed it, "to embrace a dogma is the acknowledgment of intellectual failure." It is the dogmatism of Irish life which is responsible for his own skepticism. It has forced into a negative, purely critical, position one who might have been a great transcendental teacher. As it is, he remains one of the most beautiful prose-writers in modern English.